

Reviews

Margot in wartime

Anne de Courcy, *Margot at War: Love and Betrayal in Downing Street, 1912–1916* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2015)

Review by **David Dutton**

MARGOT ASQUITH (NÉE Tennant), second wife of the leader of Britain's last purely Liberal government, is probably the best documented and most intensively researched prime ministerial spouse of the twentieth century, the very different Clementine Churchill her only possible competitor. Margot's autobiography was published in two volumes as early as 1920 and 1922. She followed this up with works such as *More Memories* (1933) and *Off the Record* (1943). Daphne Bennett's biography appeared in 1984 and, more recently, Michael and Eleanor Brock produced a polished edition of Margot's *Great War Diary* in 2014. In addition, Mrs Asquith inevitably figures prominently in books such as Colin Clifford's family history, *The Asquiths* (2002) and the published edition of the diary of Cynthia Asquith, wife of the prime minister's second son, Herbert (1968). So there is a familiarity in much of the story now narrated by Anne de Courcy, but the tale is so fascinating and told with such verve that any lack of historiographical novelty is readily forgiven.

Margot certainly exercised genuine political influence. Not only did she strive unceasingly to defend her husband's position and authority; she saw no constitutional impropriety in writing to, and sometimes summoning, Asquith's ministers in order to give them the benefit of her advice. Indeed, she had considerable confidence in her own political judgement, telling her stepson Arthur in July 1915 that she was a 'sort of political clairvoyant'.¹ Yet few would accept this self-assessment without considerable qualification. Margot was incapable of recognising her husband's shortcomings, particularly as a war leader, and was often a poor counsellor at times when good advice was desperately needed. Her partiality made her an unreliable historical witness. The second volume of Margot's autobiography prompted this complaint from the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, who

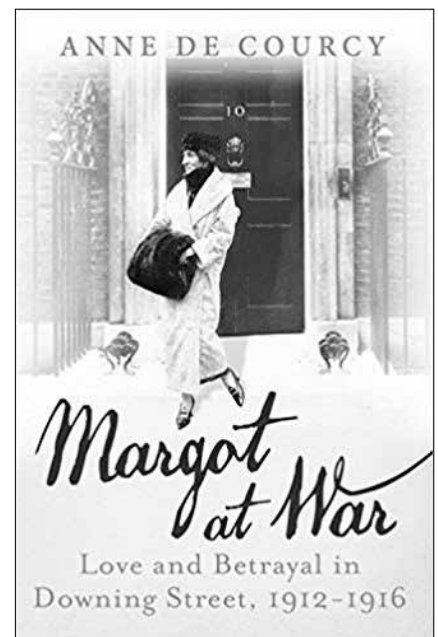
had served in Asquith's coalition government: 'To those who remember the tedious indolence of Squiff in 1916 – his dilatory slackness and indecisions – the book is utterly misleading, in fact a real travesty. Asquith ... never seems to have shaken off his desire for ease and self-indulgence.' Crawford rejoiced 'to think that I have not spoken to Mrs Asquith for twelve or perhaps fifteen years'.² Many had never regarded Margot as an appropriate wife for a British cabinet minister, let alone premier. When Asquith, ignorant of court etiquette, had written to Queen Victoria's private secretary to find out whether his proposed marriage to Margot required royal consent, Her Majesty noted that 'if this *was* required the Queen wd. not give it as she thinks *she* is most unfit for a C[abinet] Minister's wife' (p. 80). Margot's on-going fascination thus lies primarily, not in her political insights, but in the outrageous and sometimes bizarre behavior of one who kept a human skull in her bedroom – 'a faithful and silent companion ... just to remind me to *live* not to exist' (p. 23). 'In an era of frozen gentility', writes Anne de Courcy, 'her speciality was going too far' (p. 14).

Crucial to an understanding of Margot's position is the fact that she was Asquith's *second* wife. His first wife, Helen, had died of typhoid on 11 September 1891. Asquith lost little time in seeking a replacement and in April 1894 his engagement to Margot Tennant was announced. But Margot's transition into the household of a man who was already a cabinet minister was by no means easy, not least because her new husband already had a sizeable family. It would have been no surprise if she, rather than the late Princess Diana, had coined the phrase that, from the beginning, there had been three people in her marriage. At this stage, however, the interloper was not a prime ministerial mistress but his brilliant and forceful daughter Violet, then just seven years of age. In her own way, Violet became as protective of

her father as Margot was of her husband. De Courcy writes of Violet's 'almost incestuous adoration of her father and insistent, constant presence' (p. 3). But the two women were also 'incompatible characters – each was irritated by and jealous of the other' (p. 73). Margot's breathless, partly unpunctuated diary entry is revealing:

I never saw a more conspicuous instance of how little beauty matters than in Violet. She is not even soignée or prettily arranged. She has very dirty ribbons and waistbelts half below her sash, her shirts crooked, her cuffs and collars never really nice very little natural taste but somehow her vitality, her wonderful manners keenness and sweetness of nature all triumph over her torn and dirty clothes, not a very good complexion and not pretty teeth just as if they were unnoticeable trifles (p. 71).

This book's title is purposefully ambiguous. *Margot at War* might suggest a study of the experiences of the prime minister's wife in the context of the struggle against Germany. And there is much here that deals with just that. De Courcy's eye for the telling detail throws light on the efforts (or lack of them) of Margot and members of her class to adjust to the demands of the first total war in Britain's history. The continuous and ever growing need for manpower at the front had inevitable implications for those hitherto reliant on domestic servants. Pleading for exemption, Lady Elcho hoped that the war minister, Lord Kitchener,



would share her conviction that having parlour maids in the dining room was altogether too middle-class. 'I must say that I never thought that I would see parlour maids at Knole ... instead of liveries and even powdered hair' (p. 201). The writer, Naomi Mitchison, faced a similar struggle to adjust when she volunteered as a VAD nurse: 'I had never done real manual household work; I had never used mops and polishes and disinfectants. I was told to make tea but hadn't realised that tea must be made with boiling water. All that had been left to the servants' (p. 233).

But the book's subtitle and dates indicate the waging of a very different war, for it was in 1912 that the sixty-year-old prime minister became infatuated with a young woman of 25, who happened to be a good friend of Violet and the object too of the affections of Asquith's ministerial subordinate, Edwin Montagu. Coming on top of the rivalry deriving from her step-daughter, it is small wonder that Margot should later complain that 'I have only been alone with Henry and my children three weeks in nineteen years' (p. 3). The new plot would have been almost too extraordinary for a work of fiction:

Here were two men in love with the same woman – a woman who was the best friend of the daughter of one of them. A young woman who must have realised her friend's father was in love with her but who nevertheless played along with the relationship while keeping a hold on the other suitor – a suitor who could not conceive of the older man as any way a serious rival. A daughter who loved her father so all-consumingly that she was not only jealous of her step-mother but would never find another man to live up to him. A wife who loved her husband deeply, conscious of her fading attractions and miserably aware of his feelings for the younger woman (p. 210).

The Asquiths' marriage had run into trouble after a series of difficult pregnancies. Only two children had survived from five births and in 1907 Margot was advised by her doctors that further pregnancies should be avoided. In the absence of reliable contraception, this meant in practice the end of sexual relations between husband and wife. In the circumstances it was perhaps unsurprising that Asquith, described by de

Courcy as a 'groper' with 'a penchant for peering down "Pennsylvania Avenue", as a woman's cleavage was then known', should have turned his attentions elsewhere (p. 82). The ultimately unanswerable question of whether his relationship with Venetia Stanley was ever consummated has been endlessly debated. De Courcy offers the most plausible interpretation:

It was a relationship charged with intense erotic obsession on Asquith's side and the willing acceptance of greater or lesser physical intimacies on Venetia's as the price to be paid for close friendship with someone of such intellectual calibre ... it is impossible to imagine that there was no physical approach at all (p. 224).

The wider significance of the relationship has already been explored following the publication in 1982 of Asquith's side of the enormous correspondence between the prime minister and his young confidante. De Courcy confirms that, whatever else is said about the liaison, it was entirely inappropriate: 'He described Cabinet meetings and the foibles of his colleagues; military secrets were betrayed; he told her of high-level disagreements' (p. 222). When in 1915 Venetia finally decided to marry Montagu, Margot was understandably

delighted. Bumping into Jackie Fisher, who was waiting to see her husband in Downing Street, she suggested to a surprised First Sea Lord that they should there and then dance in celebration. Asquith, by contrast, was left a broken man. 'No hell can be so bad' (p. 273). His premiership had more than a year and a half to run. Arguably, however, he was never the same again. His ejection from office in December 1916, in what amounted to a palace coup, again brought Margot, seemingly unaware of her husband's failing powers, to despair. The economist, Maynard Keynes, dined with the Asquiths two days after the deposition. Margot 'started to cry with the soup, sent for cigarettes, and dropped tears and ashes together into her plate – utterly overcome' (p. 339).

Asquith's premiership can be and has been chronicled without the inclusion of this personal history. Anne de Courcy's compelling narrative shows how much is lost in such bowdlerised accounts.

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- 1 M. Brock and E. Brock (eds.), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914–1916* (London, 2014), p. xlvii.
- 2 J. Vincent (ed.), *The Crawford Papers* (Manchester, 1984), p. 471.

Fascinating diary entries of a Liberal junior minister in the thick of events

Andrew Thorpe and Richard Toye (eds.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Asquith and Lloyd George: the Diaries of Cecil Harmsworth, MP, 1909–1922*, Camden Fifth Series, Volume 50 (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

Review by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

THE ROYAL HISTORICAL Society (and its predecessor body, the Camden Society) has ever since 1838 published editions of key sources on British history. The publication is ongoing (two volumes per annum) and is now published in association with Cambridge University Press. The present offering, volume 50 in the Camden Fifth Series inaugurated in 1993, is one of the few publishing an important source from the twentieth century in a series where many

volumes are devoted to the mediaeval and Tudor periods.

Commendable, too, is the enlistment of two of our most eminent twentieth-century political historians to undertake the task. Most of the laborious, intricate task of transcribing and selecting the material was undertaken by Professor Toye, while both editors are jointly responsible for the detailed, genuinely helpful annotations and the drafting of the introduction to the work. In a sense,